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SUBJECT: LEKOTA PERSONAL ASSISTANT WARNS "WATCH OUT FOR
SHILOWA"

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Summary

1. (SBU) The Congress of the People (COPE) has been in the news recently not for the party's stance on key issues or for its plans for tackling problems at the national and provincial levels. Rather, COPE has been in the news for the continued political infighting that has plagued the party since it appointed Mvume Dandala as its presidential candidate over Mosiuoa Lekota. Poloffs met with Lekota's personal assistant, Tseliso Phomane, in mid-August to discuss the key challenges facing COPE and where the party will be headed before the 2011 local elections. End Summary.

From Nothing to a Party With Responsibilities

2. (SBU) COPE organizer Tseliso Phomane met with Poloffs in mid-August to discuss the state of the party and the direction it will take ahead of the local elections. Phomane, who nearly died because of poor health and the stress of the election campaign, said that he has not been actively involved in the party for a few months but still talks to Lekota daily. He opened the discussion about COPE by saying that the party "never recovered from the decision to field Dandala as its presidential candidate." He said, "People had no idea who the face of the party was during the campaign." He judged the party lost money and numerous voters because it could not be clear about party leadership and related, "We could have been in power right now had different decisions been made." Phomane attributed the leadership divisions to the fact that both Lekota and former Gauteng premier Mbhazima Shilowa "have massive egos." According to him, "Both men want nothing more than to be President of South Africa." He said, "When Shilowa could not get enough support to be the face of the campaign, he turned to a compromise candidate." Regarding the choice of Dandala as the party's face during the campaign, Phomane said that Lekota was personally devastated. He related, "The wounds are still fresh. He has yet to recover." He added that the party's decision not to send Lekota to Parliament only added to his wounds.

3. (SBU) Given Phomane's close ties to Lekota, Poloff asked whether Shilowa has similar "smart strategists" to advise him. Phomane answered that Shilowa is "very well-connected to Gauteng business leaders -- both black and white." He

added, "Shilowa's people are smart, but they are also ruthless. They will see to it that Lekota is pushed aside and that Shilowa is positioned to be the leader of the party." He said he expects a lot of political posturing to occur in the months ahead of COPE's national executive committee meeting in December, where leaders will be elected.

He noted, "The posturing will be behind closed doors. I do not expect it to be about criticizing African National Congress legislation or the Jacob Zuma government. It will be about quiet meetings and handshakes." Phomane said, "In the end, I expect Shilowa to be COPE's leader and presidential candidate for 2014." He pointed out that Lekota goes to COPE's headquarters every day and is actively trying to build branches. He said, "Lekota has grassroots support, but Shilowa has the connections that will move the organization forward." According to him, "There are reports that Lekota is pushing members out to insert officials favorable to his own ambitions. I just do not buy that because Lekota just wants the branches to succeed. It is not about him." When asked where COPE has picked up ground since the election, Phomane replied that the areas with the most potential for growth appear to be in the Eastern Cape and in Northwest.

14. (SBU) Phomane ended the meeting by trying to give a positive spin on COPE's situation, but his body language belied his words. He said, "We did an amazing job getting one million votes over a period of five months. No one can take that any from us." According to him, "We will win more cities in the municipal elections and be well positioned for 2014." The party is open to forming coalitions and is still in quiet discussions with the Democratic Alliance (DA) about partnering in certain areas ahead of 2011. Yet, he said, "It is different when you are negotiating out of necessity than

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out of strength (implying the DA is the stronger of the two parties)." He added that COPE needs a strong research branch like the one the DA has. Despite his statements, he jokingly said that he was looking to leave South Africa because he does not see much hope for the future of the country under the ANC and Zuma. When Poloff asked him if COPE could things, he said, "Maybe."

Comment

15. (SBU) Phomane remains as close to Lekota as anyone so his insight into the party carries weight. The ongoing political infighting in COPE may not be entirely bad. One reason it may not be bad is that it is happening now rather than during an election campaign. The party has plenty of time to work through personality clashes and to sort through political appointments. Another reason it may not be bad is that it could rid the organization of several big egos. Most political analysts and commentators agreed during the election campaign that Lekota would not have been a strong face for the party over the long term. Shilowa and his allies may be "ruthless," but Gauteng was probably governed more effectively than the Defense ministry was under Lekota. Thus, what COPE loses in the short term because of infighting it may gain in the long term in terms of a vision for the 2011 elections.
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